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Letter dated 6 April 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

With reference to my letter dated 4 April 2001, I am forwarding herewith the comments of the Government of Pakistan with regard to the misgivings created due to some recent statements by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the spokesman of the Secretary-General on the handling of the Afghan refugees issue (see annex). I request that the present letter and its annex be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda 46, and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Shamshad **Ahmad**

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Annex to the letter dated 6 April 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Comments of the Government of Pakistan on the Afghan refugee issue

A spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Islamabad made the following statement on 6 April 2001.

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I will first give you the background about the understanding reached with the United Nations Secretary-General during his visit regarding assistance to the Afghans who have been provided shelter at Jalozai and other camps.

According to United Nations estimates, at least one million Afghans have been displaced by the worst drought in living memory and are in desperate need of relief assistance. Economic hardship had driven many of them towards Pakistan. Late last year, the exodus was accelerated because of the panic created by the sanctions. United Nations relief agencies and the Secretary-General are on record for having cautioned the Security Council concerning such a consequence. Another factor contributing to dislocation has been the conflict situation in Afghanistan.

During the closing months of last year, nearly 150,000 Afghans entered Pakistan. By now their numbers have exceeded 170,000. Over 70,000 of these new arrivals were accommodated in the new Shamshatoo and Akora camps. The remaining are crowded in Jalozai. Alarmed by the increasing influx and its inability to handle the new arrivals, the Pakistani authorities asked the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to stop further registration, which was proving to be a magnet for the drought-affected and economically displaced Afghans. We instead proposed that the United Nations open relief camps inside Afghanistan to help these economically displaced people. According to our survey in the Shamshatoo camp, 43 per cent are drought affected, 32 per cent are economic migrants and only 25 per cent come from areas which are affected by both drought and conflict. These figures clearly show the need for relief efforts inside Afghanistan.

During the Secretary-General's visit, the question of new Afghan arrivals came under discussion. Earlier, the issue was discussed when Under-Secretary-General Kenzo Oshima visited Pakistan in late February. During discussions with the Secretary-General, the Pakistan side explained that Pakistan's capacity to receive further flows of refugees was exhausted and that the United Nations should provide relief to the displaced Afghans on the Afghan side of the border. The Afghan authorities had agreed to facilitate such an effort. Pakistan gave assurances that it had no intention of pushing back those Afghans who were already in Pakistan. UNHCR and any humanitarian agencies were free to provide assistance. However, Pakistan could allow the registration process and consider providing any additional site only if the United Nations agencies could also simultaneously arrange for relief assistance on the Afghan side of the border. This was agreed. *Last evening (5 April), the Secretary-General had a telephone conversation with the Chief Executive,*

during which this understanding was reconfirmed. We hope that steps will be taken to provide relief assistance on the Afghan side of the border.

Despite repeated Pakistani requests for arranging relief assistance on the Afghan side of the border, in accordance with the understanding reached during the Secretary-General's visit, nothing has been done by any of the concerned United Nations agencies. Instead, we are being pressed to allow registration and provide an additional site for the Afghans at Jalozai. In addition, there is now propaganda that Pakistan is not letting United Nations assistance reach the Jalozai Afghans. There is also absurd propaganda that Pakistan barred the visit of the Secretary-General to Jalozai, and even sinister allegations from certain quarters that Pakistan is doing so because the new arrivals are ethnically non-Pushtoons.

Let me emphasize that it is the United Nations agencies which are not acting in accordance with the understanding reached during the Secretary-General's visit. Let me also make it clear that all humanitarian organizations, United Nations or otherwise, foreign or local, are free to provide all humanitarian assistance that they can mobilize for the Jalozai as well as other camps. The Pakistani Refugee Commission and several Pakistani and foreign NGOs are operating in the camp. If any agencies are handicapped because of their bureaucratic procedures, it is their problem. But in accordance with the understanding reached during the Secretary-General's visit, registration of Afghans at Jalozai will depend on the United Nations undertaking relief efforts on the Afghan side of the border so that registration does not generate new flows of refugees. It should be noted that despite verification that the bulk of the Afghans at Shamshatoo camp are economic migrants, no United Nations agency is doing anything for their repatriation, which would be helped by the provision of relief assistance inside Afghanistan. In any event, Pakistan does not intend to forcibly repatriate these economic migrants.

It is absurd to suggest that Pakistan barred the Secretary-General from visiting Jalozai. The fact is that the high level of security required for a dignitary of the Secretary-General's status could not be assured by the authorities and we could afford no risk. This was explained to the Secretary-General. We have nothing to hide at Jalozai. It is open to the media. It is open to all United Nations officials and other humanitarian workers. We had taken Under-Secretary-General Oshima to Jalozai. The Secretary-General was fully briefed by us and the United Nations officials about the desperate condition of those Afghans. In any event, those suffering Afghans do not need another VIP visit, what they need are funds for relief and assistance.

The Afghans need assistance both inside and outside Afghanistan. It is on this score that international agencies and the donor community has disappointed them. For Afghanistan, despite repeated appeals by the Secretary-General for the required $275 million, the total commitments so far made amount to less than $46 million.

Allegation of discrimination on an ethnic basis is perverse. The new arrivals are of mixed ethnic origin as they come mostly from the drought-affected areas. There are a large number of non-Pushtoons among the over two million Afghans who are already living in Pakistan. Nonetheless, Pakistan will be very happy if the United Nations or other organizations can establish relief camps in areas under the control of the Northern Alliance, where people are also suffering from drought. Alternatively, other neighbours of Afghanistan should be persuaded to open their

borders so that the Afghans from the North do not have to trek all the way through the Taliban-controlled territory to reach Pakistan in search of food.

Pakistan rejects all this baseless criticism, which is all the more unfair in view of the fact that Pakistan has been left virtually alone to look after more than two million Afghan refugees. For the past several years, UNHCR contribution for these refugees has amounted to less than one dollar per refugee per year. With this level of contribution, the United Nations or any other organization or country has little justification to criticize Pakistan. The media plays an important role. We request it to ignore ill-conceived criticism and propaganda and focus on mobilizing assistance for the suffering Afghans.